

Sermon on the Mount #11

Ask, seek, knock

w/c 9 July 2023

"Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine." (Kathleen Norris)

Jesus gives several descriptions of the ongoing relationship between God and believers. At its heart is relationship – using the wording from The Message he goes so far as to say, *"And this is the real and eternal life: That they know you, the one and only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent."* (John 17:3). A little earlier he had promised that, in response to the disciples' obedience, *"My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."* (John 14:23 (NIV)).

The essence of the relationship is that between a child and their Father – we can use the same intimate term (Abba) for father that Jesus himself used:

"And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father'." (Galatians 4:6 (NLT))

It is in this context that we should approach the message within our reading.

Read Matthew 7:7–11

Why should we not take verse 7 as encouraging us simply to make our prayer life one long shopping list? Given the promises of Jesus about our relationship with God that we've just read what should be the structure of our prayer life?

How could we follow the way outlined by Kathleen Norris in the quotation above?

Asking is clearly praying; in the Jewish culture of that time both *seek* and *knock* were commonly used as metaphors for prayer. Jesus' message here seems to focus on continuous, persistent prayer. How do we draw a line between this and the repetition condemned by Jesus in Matthew 6:7?

The process relies on us asking – by implication God won't foist stuff onto us if we've not made the initiative. Equally, there seems to be an assumption that we'll know what it is we should ask for – the son wants bread rather than a stone after all. How do we know what it is we should ask for? Paul gives several useful directions (Romans 8:26–27; 12:2, Colossians 1:9) as to how we know what to do here. How, practically can we approach the task?

We must always remember that asking, seeking and knocking are only half the story; it all depends on us then receiving, finding and (by implication) entering. How do we discern the proper response to what we have prayed?

It can be all too easy, reading verses such as these, to turn Christianity into a dependency culture where we don't dare to do anything without asking God if it's OK. The author AW Tozer responded with this thought:

"If God gives you a watch, are you honouring Him more by asking Him what time it is or by simply consulting the watch?"

How do feel that this gives us a proper perspective on such matters?

Equally, there is danger in focussing so closely on these few verses that we conclude that faith is merely transactional – I do something (ask etc); God then responds. How do we move on from this to seeing our faith as a relationship with God? Do the words of Jeremiah 31:31–34 help in this?

"Stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Find out what God's doing. It's already blessed." (Bono)